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ABSTRACT

Neil Postman's article, "The Politics of Reading," reprinted here from the May 1970 "Harvard Educational Review," is the core of this book. Eight persons involved in various ways in the communications field (Claudia Converse, Ralph Staiger, William Jenkins, Robert E. Beck, John Donovan, Frank Smith, Lee Deighton, and Robert F. Hogan) reply to Postman's thesis that print media is becoming obsolete and reactionary and that, hence, we should not be so insistent on teaching everyone to read. In addition, Postman asks, "What is reading good for?" and each respondent addresses himself to this question as well. The book ends with a reply by Postman. Directed to the entire reading profession, the book is designed to provoke discussion rather than to provide definitive answers to difficult and controversial questions. (TO)

Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann
Editor

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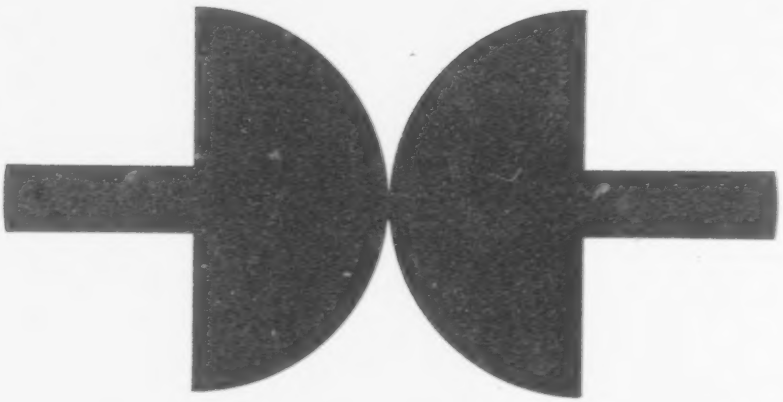
# The Politics of Reading:



## Point-Counterpoint

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International Reading Association
and
ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

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# The Politics of Reading:

## Point-Counterpoint

Edited by Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann,
Associate Director,
ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills

ira
International Reading Association
Six Tyre Avenue, Newark, Delaware 19711
and

ERIC RCS

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

# Contents


**Foreword** vii
*William K. Durr*

**Introduction** ix
*Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann*

**The Politics of Reading** 1
*Neil Postman*

**Postman Revisited** 13
*Claudia Converse and Ralph C. Staiger*

**Postman and the Overkill Syndrome** 21
*William Jenkins*

**The Postman Portrait** 33
*Robert E. Beck*

**Wow, Man! or Smile! You're on World Camera!** 39
*John Donovan*

**The Politics of Ignorance** 43
*Frank Smith*

**Postman's Rhetoric: A Closer Look** 57
*Lee Deighton*

**Damn You, Neil Postman . . .** 63
*Robert F. Hogan*

**In Retrospect** 69
*Neil Postman*

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# Foreword

*William K. Durr*

There are many procedures in our society which we follow primarily because they are part of our social mores. These extend from eating our meals with accepted utensils to supporting or rejecting international political systems because of our government's stance for or against those systems.

Are we guilty of the same uncritical acceptance in education? Like the mountain climber who scales peaks only because they are there, do we sometimes teach skills and subjects only because they are there? As responsible educators, we can neither teach subjects because they are traditional in our schools nor deal with certain curricular areas only because our constituencies support them. We have leadership responsibilities which will not allow us the luxury of such mental indolence.

These responsibilities extend to sound reasons for instruction in reading. It is not taught only because there are printed materials to read or because it has been an

*William K. Durr is the President of the International Reading Association for 1972–73.*

accepted part of the school's program for hundreds of years. Neither is it taught to prevent critical analysis and change in our social structure.

Why *do* we teach reading when more and more electronic media of communication are becoming available to us? Is it because each person should have a right to derive his own interpretation of literary works through a more personal interaction with the author's printed thoughts rather than through a middleman's interpretation brought to us electronically? Is it because each person should have a right to savor and analyze the beauty and power of printed language at his own individual pace rather than at a machine dictated pace? Is it because even in the days of electronic miracles, the responsibilities of citizenship cannot be fully met without the ability to dissect the efforts of those who would influence our thoughts through the printed word?

Today's teacher of reading knows that our goals must include sound reading abilities—abilities to find pleasure and to grow as human beings through reading, to go beyond literal understanding to critical analysis of the print which bombards us.

This book should help each of us think through our goals for reading instruction. Do we know why we teach reading? And, of equal importance, can we defend our reasons against those who contend that much of our effort is wasted and imply that our motivation, in fact, might be sinister?

We are indebted to Neil Postman for stimulating us to examine the issue of whether reading instruction is justified and to the other contributors, who provoke us to think on the points and counterpoints dealing with the issue.

This is the first of a group of publications to be put out under the joint efforts of the International Reading Association and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. We hope you find the ones to follow as provocative as this volume.

# Introduction

*Sister Rosemary Winkeljohann*

At a time when everything about education is being analyzed or assailed, it is inevitable that the question "What is reading good for?" should be asked. William Powell, Dean of Education, University of Evansville (Indiana), a member of the Advisory Board of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, first suggested that ERIC/RCS might explore this question. The rest of the Advisory Board concurred. ERIC/RCS, acting upon the suggestion, invited leaders in professional organizations, reading specialists, a teacher, and a publisher to react to Neil Postman's *Harvard Educational Review* article, "The Politics of Reading," in which the question at issue is forcefully asked. The reactions are printed here along with a rebuttal by Postman, who read the manuscripts before the document went to press.

Having given Neil Postman his turn at rebuttal and clarification, it would seem that the fair and logical thing to do would be to extend the same courtesy to Messrs. Hogan, Smith, Jenkins, Beck, Deighton, Donovan, and Staiger and Ms. Converse. And then, of course, Postman should have a chance to clear up misunderstandings of his rebuttal. And so on, in infinite regress, until from

"The Politics of Reading: Point-Counterpoint" would grow an edifice outdoing Borges' fantastical library. But that will not do at all. We will leave the disputants to continue their debate—and an important one it is—at conferences, in journals, and in books of their own.

The teaching of reading is a highly complex enterprise which is the concern not only of administrators, teachers, and parents but also of businessmen and politicians. Reading, in fact, is almost synonymous with formal education, especially in the elementary schools. If this book can provoke its readers into doing some hard thinking about just what schools are up to when they teaching reading, it will have served its purpose.

This work is directed to the entire profession—classroom teacher, college student, language scholar—to all those dealing with the teaching of reading. We direct it to all who love *Winnie the Pooh,* to those who enjoy Pooh being read to while he grows thin after wedging himself in the doorway because he had stuffed himself with "hummy." It is directed to the film advocate and to all who have ceased writing letters and instead send a cassette tape. It is directed to the media specialist, who is indispensable in the educational programs of our schools. Parents, school board members, and legislators need to concern themselves with the "politics of reading" by entering into the discussions and becoming aware of the trends. It is directed to those of us who with Christopher Robin sitting on the middle stair say, "When I am here, I'm neither up nor down."

A publication such as this is not, of course, going to establish definitively what reading is good for, but it should provoke discussion.

# The Politics of Reading

*Neil Postman*

Teachers of reading comprise a most sinister political group, whose continued presence and strength are more a cause for alarm than celebration. I offer this thought as a defensible proposition, all the more worthy of consideration because so few people will take it seriously.

My argument rests on a fundamental and, I think, unassailable assumption about education: namely, that all educational practices are profoundly political in the sense that they are designed to produce one sort of human being rather than another—which is to say, an educational system always proceeds from some model of what a human being *ought* to be like. In the broadest sense, a political ideology is a conglomerate of systems for promoting certain

*Neil Postman is a Professor of Media Ecology at New York University.*

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* Neil Postman. "The Politics of Reading." *Harvard Educational Review* 40 (May 1970), 244–252. Copyright © 1970 by President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission. Originally presented as the keynote address at the Lehigh University Reading Conference, January 24, 1970.

modes of thinking and behavior. And there is no system I can think of that more directly tries to do this than the schools. There is not one thing that is done to, for, with, or against a student in school that is not rooted in a political bias, ideology, or notion. This includes everything from the arrangement of seats in a classroom, to the rituals practiced in the auditorium, to the textbooks used in lessons, to the dress required of both teachers and students, to the tests given, to the subjects that are taught, and, most emphatically, to the intellectual skills that are promoted. And what is called reading, it seems to me, just about heads the list. For to teach reading, or even to promote vigorously the teaching of reading, is to take a definite political position on how people should behave and on what they ought to value. Now, teachers, I have found, respond in one of three ways to such an assertion. Some of them deny it. Some of them concede it but without guilt or defensiveness of any kind. And some of them don't know what it means. I want to address myself to the latter, because in responding to them I can include all the arguments I would use in dealing with the others.

In asserting that th teaching of reading is essentially a political enterprise, the most obvious question I am asking is, "What is reading good for?" When I ask this question of reading teachers, I am supplied with a wide range of answers. Those who take the low ground will usually say that skill in reading is necessary in order for a youngster to do well in school. The elementary teacher is preparing the youngster for the junior high teacher, who prepares him for the senior high teacher, who, in turn, prepares him for the college teacher, and so on. Now, this answer is true but hardly satisfactory. In fact, it amounts to a description of the *rules* of the school game but says nothing about the purpose of these rules. So, when teachers are pushed a little further, they sometimes answer that the school system, at all levels, makes reading skill a precondition to success because unless one can read well, he is denied access to gainful and interesting employment as an adult. This answer raises at least a half-dozen political questions, the most interesting of which is whether or not one's childhood education

ought to be concerned with one's future employment. I am aware that most people take it as axiomatic that the schooling process should prepare youth for a tranquil entry into our economy, but this is a political view that I think deserves some challenge. For instance, when one considers that the second most common cause of death among adolescents in the U.S. is suicide, or that more people are hospitalized for mental illness than all other illnesses combined, or that one out of every twenty-two murders in the United States is committed by a parent against his own child, or that more than half of all high school students have already taken habit-forming, hallucinogenic, or potentially addictive narcotics, or that by the end of this year, there will be more than one million school drop-outs around, one can easily prepare a case which insists that the schooling process be designed for purposes other than vocational training. If it is legitimate at all for schools to claim a concern for the adult life of students, then why not pervasive and compulsory programs in mental health, sex, or marriage and the family? Besides, the number of jobs that require reading skill much beyond what teachers call a "fifth grade level" is probably quite small and scarcely justifies the massive, compulsory, unrelenting reading programs that characterize most schools.

But most reading teachers would probably deny that their major purpose is to prepare students to satisfy far-off vocational requirements. Instead, they would take the high ground and insist that the basic purpose of reading instruction is to open the student's mind to the wonders and riches of the written word, to give him access to great fiction and poetry, to permit him to function as an informed citizen, to have him experience the sheer pleasure of reading. Now, this is a satisfactory answer indeed, but, in my opinion, it is almost totally untrue.

And to the extent that it is true, it is true in a way quite different from anything one might expect. For instance, it is probably true that in a highly complex society one cannot be governed unless he can read forms, regulations, notices, catalogues, road signs, and the like.

Thus, some minimal reading skill is necessary if you are to be a "good citizen," but "good citizen" here means one who can follow the instructions of those who govern him. If you cannot read, you cannot be an obedient citizen. You are also a good citizen if you are an enthusiastic consumer. And so, some minimal reading competence is required if you are going to develop a keen interest in all the products that it is necessary for you to buy. If you do not read, you will be a relatively poor market. In order to be a good and loyal citizen, it is also necessary for you to believe in the myths and superstitions of your society. Therefore, a certain minimal reading skill is needed so that you can learn what these are, or have them reinforced. Imagine what would happen in a school if a Social Studies text were introduced that described the growth of American civilization as being characterized by four major developments: (1) insurrection against a legally constituted government, in order to achieve a political identity; (2) genocide against the indigenous population, in order to get land; (3) keeping human beings as slaves, in order to achieve an economic base; and (4) the importation of "coolie" labor, in order to build the railroads. Whether this view of American history is true or not is beside the point. It is at least as true or false as the conventional view *and* it would scarcely be allowed to appear unchallenged in a schoolbook intended for youth. What I am saying here is that an important function of the teaching of reading is to make students accessible to political and historical myth. It is entirely possible that the main reason middle-class whites are so concerned to get lower-class blacks to read is that blacks will remain relatively inaccessible to standard-brand beliefs unless and until they are minimally literate. It just may be too dangerous, politically, for any substantial minority of our population *not* to believe that our flags are sacred, our history is noble, our government is representative, our laws are just, and our institutions are viable. A reading public is a responsible public, by which is meant that it believes most or all of these superstitions and which is probably why we still have literacy tests for voting.

One of the standard beliefs about the reading process is that it is more or less neutral. Reading, the argument goes, is just a skill. What people read is their own business, and the reading teacher merely helps to increase a student's options. If one wants to read about America, one may read DeToqueville or *The Daily News*; if one wants to read literature, one may go to Melville or Jacqueline Susann. In theory, this argument is compelling. In practice, it is pure romantic nonsense. *The New York Daily News* is the most widely read newspaper in America. Most of our students will go to the grave not having read, of their own choosing, a paragraph of DeToqueville or Thoreau or John Stuart Mill or, if you exclude the Gettysburg Address, even Abraham Lincoln. As between Jacqueline Susann and Herman Melville—well, the less said, the better. To put it bluntly, among every 100 students who learn to read, my guess is that no more than one will employ the process toward any of the lofty goals which are customarily held before us. The rest will use the process to increase their knowledge of trivia, to maintain themselves at a relatively low level of emotional maturity, and to keep themselves simplistically uninformed about the social and political turmoil around them.

Now, there are teachers who feel that, even if what I say is true, the point is nonetheless irrelevant. After all, they say, the world is not perfect. If people do not have enough time to read deeply, if people do not have sensibilities refined enough to read great literature, if people do not have interests broad enough to be stimulated by the unfamiliar, the fault is not in our symbols, but in ourselves. But there is a point of view that proposes that the "fault," in fact, *does* lie in our symbols. Marshall McLuhan is saying that each medium of communication contains a unique metaphysic—that each medium makes special kinds of claims on our senses, and therefore, on our behavior. McLuhan himself tells us that he is by no means the first person to have noticed this. Socrates took a very dim view of the written word, on the grounds that it diminishes man's capacity to memorize and that it forces one to follow an argument rather than to partic-

ipate in it. He also objected to the fact that once something has been written down, it may easily come to the attention of persons for whom it was not intended. One can well imagine what Socrates would think about wiretapping and other electronic bugging devices. St. Ambrose, a prolific writer and reader, once complained to St. Jerome, another prolific writer and reader, that whatever else its virtues, reading was the most antisocial behavior yet devised by man. Other people have made observations about the effects of communications media on the psychology of a culture, but it is quite remarkable how little has been said about this subject. Most criticism of print, or any other medium, has dealt with the content of the medium; and it is only in recent years that we have begun to understand that each medium, *by its very structure,* makes us do things with our bodies, our senses, and our minds that in the long run are probably more important than any other messages communicated by the medium.

Now that it is coming to an end, we are just beginning to wonder about the powerful biases forced upon us by the Age of the Printed Word. McLuhan is telling us that print is a "hot" medium, by which he means that it induces passivity and anesthetizes all our senses except the visual. He is also telling us that electronic media, like the LP record and television, are reordering our entire sensorium, restoring some of our sleeping senses, and, in the process, making all of us seek more active participation in life. I think McLuhan is wrong in connecting the *causes* of passivity and activity so directly to the structure of media. I find it sufficient to say that whenever a new medium—a new communications technology—enters a culture, *no matter what its structure,* it gives us a new way of experiencing the world, and, consequently, releases tremendous energies and causes people to seek new ways of organizing their institutions. When Gutenberg announced that he could manufacture books, as he put it, "without the help of reed, stylus, or pen but by wondrous agreement, proportion, and harmony of punches and types," he could scarcely imagine that he was about to become the most important political

and social revolutionary of the Second Millenium. And yet, that is what happened. Four hundred and fifty years ago, the printed word, far from being a medium that induced passivity, generated cataclysmic change. From the time Martin Luther posted his theses in 1517, the printing press disseminated the most controversial, inflammatory, and wrenching ideas imaginable. The Protestant Reformation would probably not have occurred if not for the printing press. The development of both capitalism and nationalism were obviously linked to the printing press. So were new literary forms, such as the novel and the essay. So were new conceptions of education, such as written examinations. And, of course, so was the concept of scientific methodology, whose ground rules were established by Descartes in his *Discourse on Reason*. Even today in recently illiterate cultures, such as Cuba, print is a medium capable of generating intense involvement, radicalism, artistic innovation, and institutional upheaval. But in those countries where the printed word has been pre-eminent for over 400 years, print retains very few of these capabilities. Print is not dead, it's just old—and old technologies do not generate new patterns of behavior. For us, print is the technology of convention. We have accommodated our senses to it. We have routinized and even ritualized our responses to it. We have devoted our institutions, which are now venerable, to its service. By maintaining the printed word as the keystone of education, we are therefore opting for political and social stasis.

It is 126 years since Professor Morse transmitted a message electronically for the first time in the history of the planet. Surely it is not too soon for educators to give serious thought to the message he sent: "What hath God wrought?" We are very far from knowing the answers to that question, but we do know that electronic media have released unprecedented energies. It's worth saying that the gurus of the peace movement—Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Phil Ochs, for instance—were known to their constituency mostly as voices on LP records. It's worth saying that Vietnam, being our first television war, is also the most unpopular war in our history. It's

worth saying that Lyndon Johnson was the first president ever to have resigned because of a "credibility gap." It's worth saying that it is now commonplace for post-television college sophomores to usurp the authority of college presidents and for young parish priests to instruct their bishops in the ways of *both* man and God. And it's also worth saying that black people, after 350 years of bondage, want their freedom—now. Post-television blacks are, indeed, our true *now* generation.

Electronic media are predictably working to unloose disruptive social and political ideas, along with new forms of sensibility and expression. Whether this is being achieved by the structure of the media, or by their content, or by some combination of both, we cannot be sure. But like Gutenberg's infernal machine of 450 years ago, the electric plug is causing all hell to break loose. Meanwhile, the schools are still pushing the old technology, and, in fact, pushing it with almost hysterical vigor. Everyone's going to learn to read, even if we have to kill them to do it. It is as if the schools were the last bastion of the old culture, and if it has to go, why let's take as many down with us as we can.

For instance, the schools are still the principal source of the idea that literacy is equated with intelligence. Why, the schools even promote the idea that *spelling* is related to intelligence! Of course, if any of this were true, reading teachers would be the smartest people around. One doesn't mean to be unkind, but if that indeed is the case, no one has noticed it. In any event, it is an outrage that children who do not read well, or at all, are treated as if they are stupid. It is also masochistic, since the number of nonreaders will obviously continue to increase and, thereby, the schools will condemn themselves, by their own definition of intelligence, to an increasing number of stupid children. In this way, we will soon have remedial reading-readiness classes, along with remedial classes for those not yet ready for their remedial reading-readiness class.

The schools are also still promoting the idea that literacy is the richest source of aesthetic experience. This, in the face of the fact that kids are spending a billion

dollars a year to buy LP records and see films. The schools are still promoting the idea that the main source of wisdom is to be found in libraries, from which most schools, incidentally, carefully exclude the most interesting books. The schools are still promoting the idea that the nonliterate person is somehow not fully human, an idea that will surely endear us to the nonliterate peoples of the world. (It is similar to the idea that salvation is obtainable only through Christianity—which is to say, it is untrue, bigoted, reactionary, and based on untenable premises, to boot.)

Worst of all, the schools are using these ideas to keep nonconforming youth—blacks, the politically disaffected, and the economically disadvantaged, among others—in their place. By taking this tack, the schools have become a major force for political conservatism at a time when everything else in the culture screams for rapid reorientation and change.

What would happen if our schools took the drastic political step of trying to make the new technology the keystone of education? The thought will seem less romantic if you remember that the start of the Third Millenium is only thirty-one years away. No one knows, of course, what would happen, but I'd like to make a few guesses. In the first place, the physical environment would be entirely different from what it is now. The school would look something like an electric circus—arranged to accommodate television cameras and monitors, film projectors, computers, audio and video tape machines, and radio, photographic, and stereophonic equipment. As he is now provided with textbooks, each student would be provided with his own still-camera, 8 mm. camera, and tape cassette. The school library would contain books, of course, but at least as many films, records, video tapes, audio tapes, and computer programs. The major effort of the school would be to assist students in achieving what has been called "multimedia literacy." Therefore, speaking, film-making, picture-taking, televising, computer-programming, listening, perhaps even music playing, drawing, and dancing would be completely acceptable means of expressing intellectual interest and competence. They

would certainly be given weight at least equal to reading and writing.

Since intelligence would be defined in a new way, a student's ability to create an idea would be at least as important as his ability to classify and remember the ideas of others. New evaluation procedures would come into being, and standardized tests—the final, desperate refuge of the print-bound bureaucrat—would disappear. Entirely new methods of instruction would evolve. In fact, schools might abandon the notion of teacher instruction altogether. Whatever disciplines lent themselves to packaged, lineal, and segmented presentation would be offered through a computerized and individualized program. And students could choose from a wide variety of such programs whatever they wished to learn about. This means, among other things, that teachers would have to stop acting like teachers and find something useful to do, like, for instance, helping young people to resolve some of their more wrenching emotional problems.

In fact, a school that put electric circuitry at its center would have to be prepared for some serious damage to all of its bureaucratic and hierarchical arrangements. Keep in mind that hierarchies derive their authority from the notion of unequal access to information. Those at the top have access to more information than those at the bottom. That is, in fact, why they are at the top and the others, at the bottom. But today those who are at the bottom of the school hierarchy, namely, the students, have access to at least as much information about most subjects as those at the top. At present, the only way those at the top can maintain control over them is by carefully discriminating against what the students know—that is, by labelling what the students know as unimportant. But suppose cinematography was made a "major" subject instead of English literature? Suppose chemotherapy was made a "major" subject? or space technology? or ecology? or mass communication? or popular music? or photography? or race relations? or urban life? Even an elementary school might then find itself in a situation where the faculty is at the bottom and its students at the top.

Certainly, it would be hard to know who are the teachers and who the learners. 

And then perhaps a school would become a place where *everybody*, including the adults, is trying to learn something. Such a school would obviously be problem-centered, *and* future-centered, *and* change-centered, and, as such, would be an instrument of cultural and political radicalism. In the process we might find that our youth would also learn to read without pain and with a degree of success and economy not presently known.

I want to close on this thought: teachers of reading represent an important political pressure group. They may not agree with me that they are a sinister political group. But I should think that they would want to ask at least a few questions *before* turning to consider the *techniques* of teaching reading. These questions would be: What is reading good for? What is it better or worse than? What are my motives in promoting it? And the ultimate political question, "Whose side am I on?"

# Postman Revisited

*Claudia Converse*
*Ralph C. Staiger*

It is necessary for us to summarize what Postman has said before we analyze his argument. He first asserts that the teaching of reading is a sinister political activity, probably the most political of all educational practices. He then explains that in pointing out the essentially political nature of the teaching of reading he is actually asking, "What is reading good for?" He divides the responses he has received to this question from reading teachers into two categories: one, on the practical level, relates reading to economic integration into society, while the other, on an ideal level, sees reading as a means toward the greater growth of the individual.

The economic motive is rejected by Postman, not because it is untrue, but because it is inadequate. He maintains that the society toward which this economic preparation is directed confronts the individual with other crucial problems as well, problems for which no educational preparation is provided, so that a justification based solely upon

*Ralph C. Staiger is the Executive Secretary and Treasurer of the International Reading Association. Claudia Converse is the Administrative Assistant of IRA.*

a concern for the vocational life of students is an insufficient justification for reading. The more respectable motive, that of providing individual fulfillment through access to a realm of experience not ordinarily available, Postman rejects as almost wholly untrue. In actual fact, he tells us, reading merely produces obedient subject/consumers who are trained to respond to the directives of an oppressive society and who employ their reading ability toward the consumption of trash and trivia.

Postman's fundamental criticism of reading, however, is that it is outdated in a technological society. In its day, he holds, the novelty of reading on a wide scale which resulted from the invention of the printing press acted as a force for revolutionary change. Now, in its twilight, reading acts as a reactionary and conservative force, maintaining a system of education based upon unequal access to information against the advent of newer, more universal, and more effective modes of communication.

### *Reading and Society*

To say that reading is political in nature is hardly exceptional, since every educational discipline, indeed every human communication, is inherently political in that it depends upon a notion of what the receiver should attend to and requires a change in the receiver's behavior to signal the effect of the message. It is arguable, though, that reading is the *most* political of educational disciplines. Unlike science and mathematics, which depend upon the adoption of a specific world view and a specific mode of thought, reading makes no such demands. On the contrary, the ideology of reading maintains the value of alternative ways of apprehending and ordering experience. In fact, it is not surprising that Postman's question—"What is reading good for?"—elicited responses on more than one level, for reading has many meanings and involves a wide range of purposes; to ask this question is to ask, in effect, "What does reading mean to you?" To report that its ideology is violated either in the teaching or the practice of reading or in the social

value placed upon reading ability says nothing about reading itself.

In a similar sense, to deplore the teaching of reading because of its misuse by either the individual or by society says nothing essential about reading itself. In terms of content, the reading process is indeed neutral, contrary to Postman's opinion. To say that the public chooses to read low grade material is to say something about the public, but not about the reading process, while to suppose that trash and trivia are found exclusively in written material is to reveal a remarkable critical tolerance toward other media.

On a societal level, there seems no logical connection between the level of literacy and the degree of either oppression or insanity in a society. Both pathologies adapt themselves readily to the conditions at hand, and until it can be demonstrated that nonliterate societies are more sane and liberated than literate societies, the reading process must be held innocent of responsibility for the quality of society.

### *The Importance of Novelty*

The most interesting and challenging aspect of Postman's argument is his identification of novelty as the most important factor in communications media. Along with McLuhan he accepts the primacy of new devices and techniques in determining the course of human history, but he parts with McLuhan on the role played by the structure of the communications media in this process. In place of the traditional form/content dichotomy accepted with altered emphasis by McLuhan, Postman sets up a dyad consisting of novelty and content, in which novelty becomes the motive force bearing with it a more or less neutral content. Thus, for Postman the importance of the invention of the printing press was not that it initiated the wide distribution of a particular informational structure, but rather that it introduced a novel method of communication. This novelty, he maintains, provided the driving force for radical changes in human history, including, but

not limited to, the Protestant Reformation, capitalism, and scientific methodology. In our time, novel methods of communication have again appeared, bringing in their wake stirrings of change as profound as those which followed the invention of the printing press. Rather than continue to uphold a system of education based upon the values and skills appropriate to an earlier time, we must, he concludes, restructure both the system and content of education to take this revolution in communications into account.

Postman's argument derives from the position of Technological Determinism, which provides a convenient and tidy structure for human history, but which, unfortunately, does not square with fact. This view sees the course of history as resembling the cross section of a staircase in which each riser represents a new technique or device which appears *deus ex machina*. Further, it requires that the inventor in each case work in a social vacuum, producing inventions which have no relation to the needs of himself or his community.

In reality, it can be easily shown that the roots of the movements attributed to the appearance of "crucial" inventions existed prior to their appearance and in most cases contributed to such inventions. Certainly it makes sense to ask whether people developed a desire to read because Gutenberg invented a printing press, or whether he invented his press because people wanted books. Perhaps even more significant are those "revolutionary" inventions which lie fallow until a social need calls them into use. In 1973 we will celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "invention" of the transistor. Since 1948 the transistor has clearly revolutionized communications technology, yet a working transistor based upon the drift field effect existed as early as 1925. Not until the postwar expansion of communications generated the need for a compact and economical replacement for the vacuum tube did the transistor move from the laboratory to the market.

In this light, two questions present themselves regarding Postman's position: Is the view of literacy as a single stage in human history resulting from the invention of the printing press historically accurate? Is the contemporary

social ferment the result of the expansion of electronic media, or part of the cause?



*Literacy and Technology*

The view that literacy became significant in Western culture only after the fifteenth century ignores the extent to which our knowledge of the ancient world is based upon written materials. Far from being limited to monumental inscriptions for written evidence of life in the Mediterranean world, the historian is confronted with an embarrassment of material, ranging from the tabula of Roman schoolboys and the shopping lists of Greek housewives to ceremonial caches of written material, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Literacy, it would seem, has prospered and declined independent of techniques but in keeping with the need for the unique service it provides. That this service is far from irrelevant to the contemporary world is clear from the degree to which technology itself depends upon reading for both the communication and storage of information. If technology has dealt a death blow to literacy, the technologists themselves are apparently unaware of the fact, for both the number and circulation of specialized periodicals in technical fields are steadily increasing.

The question remains, however, whether the electronic media are capable of supplanting reading as a way of experiencing the world and as a source of social mobilization, as claimed by Postman. Although the impact of the electronic media and, more especially, their wide availability are quite recent, sufficient experience has been gained to allow at least a provisional judgment as to their strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps most important is the realization that although Postman minimizes the role of structure in media, each medium does in fact impose certain aesthetic forms on the content transmitted. It is widely admitted that cinema is at its best when portraying action, and this is even more apparent in television. As Walter Scott, board chairman of NBC, has said, "Because television is a visual medium, it may scant the background

and significance of events to focus on the outward appearance—the comings and goings of statesmen rather than the issues that confront them."[1]

In contrast to the dependence of visual media upon action, the aural media seem to require a heavy overlay of emotive content to be accepted. As composers have found, often to their chagrin, attempts to convey either thought or action in music easily become grotesque if realism is carried too far, and a similar effect is apparent in the LP recording, whether of speech or music. It is possible to detect this effect in extant reproductions of early news and sports broadcasts compared to their later counterparts. The earlier technique of "straight" reporting was gradually replaced by the emotive style characteristic of contemporary broadcasting. One can hardly imagine that the LP recording could be employed successfully to present a "straight" account of any event of social importance, rather than the emotively interpreted account characteristic of the pop song genre.

More important perhaps than the aesthetic restraints imposed upon the electronic media are the economic determinants of what is and what is not produced. The mass market requirement imposed by the high costs involved limits the content of such media to that which will be acceptable to a substantial group over a short time span. In view of this combination of aesthetic and economic restraint, it is difficult to see how the electronic media can do anything beyond joining and perhaps exaggerating preexisting tendencies. In order for the market for such media to exist, other factors, such as dramatic social events, must act as catalysts.

Neither does it seem likely that the electronic media will ever be free of the abuses to which literacy has been subject. As a means of experiencing the world, they can equally well be used to avoid experiencing the world; as a means of experiencing truth, they can equally well be used to experience lies; as a means of liberating, they can equally well be used to oppress.

[1] Quoted by Robert MacNeil in "The News on TV and How It Is Made," *Harper's Magazine* 237 (October 1968), pp. 72–80.

It is entirely possible that the object for which reading is good lies in a realm wholly apart from the social and political context in which Postman asks his question. As the work of Paulo Freire demonstrates, remarkable movement toward personal as well as social liberation occurs when a man becomes literate. Perhaps, in order to gain the final answer to his question—"What is reading good for?"—Postman must pose it not to teachers of reading, but to men such as the pupil of Freire who reacted: "I could not sleep last night . . . because last evening I wrote my name . . . and I understand that I am I. . . . This means that *we* are responsible."[2]

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[2] Quoted by Ivan D. Illich in *Celebration of Awareness* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 154.

# Postman and the Overkill Syndrome

*William Jenkins*

Perhaps some rules should have been established for the preparation of this response. Rather than read the article in Xerox reprint perhaps I should have listened to a cassette tape of it read by Postman, or watched a video tape presentation of it by him, or listened to a recording that he made of it. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the old-fashioned print, and as one does in preparing a response, I was able to read the article a number of times to ferret obscure meanings and to ruminate over implied purposes. I was also able to write in the margin of my copy—couldn't do that with a video tape—and to underline passages that I wanted to be sure to respond to—couldn't do that with a cassette tape—and to jot down points I wanted to make to bolster my response—couldn't do that with a recording. But it was an enjoyable exercise nonetheless.

Postman is absolutely right when he asserts that all education is a political enterprise. I couldn't agree with him more except perhaps to add that it is also an economic enterprise, and sociological, and psychological, and

*William Jenkins is the Dean of the School of Education at Portland State University.*

so on ad infinitum. In other words, education indeed is a complex enterprise. This is not a new idea, however. Any thoughtful teacher knows that he constantly must make choices about what he will teach children and what he won't. The morality question is not usually overlooked either. The thoughtful teacher has long known that in teaching children he attempts to give them certain values, lead them to discover others, and make them question certain others, and—a notion not quite so widely accepted by the general public—he suggests, implies, cajoles, and on occasion outright tells them to reject other values. However, teachers, whatever their subject or grade specialty, do not think of themselves as a sinister political group, if a political group at all; although they are in fact politicians, or neo-politicians, they are not quite as heavy-handed as Postman would have them be.

Postman, of course, is guilty of overstatement in his paper. It must have indeed made good listening for the audience at Lehigh University, where it was first presented. He is highly selective in the points that he wants to make and he provides limited substantiation for many of his ideas. Frequently, no substantiation at all is presented. He asserts cause and effect where none exists, a reliable technique for the debunker or for the strongly negative position. This is proper. A positive, constructive, and new workable position would have to be documented and substantiated. It would be marked by tentativeness. That would make for duller reading and duller listening. This paper was anything but dull.

The careful reader or the careful listener has the task of winnowing and sifting Postman's ideas. It's a task that he naturally should assume when he becomes the reader or the listener, but here it's doubly crucial, because a final commission of Postman is his gross naivete about matters educational.

It would be unfair to ascribe Machiavellian motives to Postman, for I doubt sincerely that this was his intent or purpose. This quotation from Machiavelli pinpoints the dilemma which faced him:

> It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out nor more doubtful of success nor more dan-

> gerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things, for the reformer has enemies in all of those who profit by the old order and only luke-warm defenders in all of those who would profit by the new.

Postman did take on a task of great magnitude. But so does any debunker. The task facing me, a debunker of a debunker, is indeed difficult. Postman has said, in effect, that if you think contrary to me you are nefariously political in your position and your purposes. He also has said, in effect, that if you agree with me you are moral, ethical, and on the side of the angels. Moreover, if one agrees with Postman's position he becomes pro-student, pro-black, pro-new order, current, and relevant. I want to be all of these things, and I think I am, but I don't necessarily find myself in agreement with Neil Postman about the politics of reading.

Postman draws his strongest position from McLuhan, who has written that each communication medium, because it is what it is, makes special kinds of claims on our senses. This position is that a multimedia approach to education—more about this later—will correct the skewed approach to education which the reading emphasis has given. Reading, he says, makes special kinds of claims on children's senses and leads to certain types of behavior, whereas other media lead, in his opinion, to more desirable behaviors and a more relevant, viable, and open educational system.

He asks, "What is reading good for?" I find that question difficult to deal with. A more proper question for me is "What is reading for?" The answers are so obvious that they probably should not be stated here, but I will state them nonetheless. Reading to me is for information, learning, aesthetics, and achievement. The purposes are so obvious that rarely does the teacher say to herself, "I'll have the children read this because it will be a good aesthetic experience for them" or "because it will create in them a heightened sense of belonging." But the purposes are known to practically every teacher in the grades.

On occasion Postman separates the medium from the content, although, as I indicated previously, he believes in McLuhan's position that the content and the medium are

inseparable, if not one. On occasion, he takes educators to task for their choice of medium (and thereby content), but in other places he separates the medium from the content and criticizes only the choice of content.

A case in point is when Postman describes a good citizen as "one who can follow the instructions of those who govern him." Any teacher knows that this blind adherence to governmental pronouncements is not the mark of a good citizen. It matters not whether the pronouncement comes by newspaper, essay, radio, or television. The good citizens, as many children are taught in first grade, are the ones who are thoughtful about what is pronounced for them. Postman goes on to assert that "You are also a good citizen if you are an enthusiastic consumer." Again, this is not so. Distributive education, which is working its way down into the grades and which has children analyze advertisements and read *Consumer Reports* and *Changing Times*, teaches them to be cautious, wary, and critical consumers, but not necessarily enthusiastic. Fourth grade readers have examples of real and sometimes fictional advertisements which children learn to read while they are being trained in critical reading. A bit later Postman says, "And so, some minimal reading competence is required if you are going to develop a keen interest in all the products that it is necessary for you to buy." A keen interest, yes, a wary spending of one's money, yes, but enthusiastic gullibility, no.

It is an overstatement to say that we teach reading to make accessible to students political and historical myths. Of course we do, but we also try to present for them facts, ideas, counter-ideas, speculations, hypotheses, and interpretations honestly arrived at. Furthermore, historical fact does not bear out his speculation that whites want lower class blacks to read so that they can have access to standard brand beliefs. Nor is it true that "It just may be too dangerous, politically, for any substantial minority of our population *not* to believe that our flags are sacred, our history is noble, our government is representative, our laws are just, and our institutions are viable." Postman overlooks the historical fact that blacks, a little more than a century ago, were forbidden to read and to learn to read

under penalty of the lash, castration, death, or being sold to new masters, because danger lay in their learning to read, rather than in their not learning to read.

There is more to reading than just being a skill. Of course, reading has content and one can be politically manipulative or politically ethical by his choice of what he gives children to read. But even the immoral idea, the unethical choice, the misrepresentation which is given to children to read is not quite as dangerous as Postman would have it. He overlooks the Hegelian principle that every idea at its inception or upon one's first encounter with it brings with it its opposite. When one thinks of matter, if he thinks at all, he thinks of non-matter. When one thinks of truth, he also thinks of untruth, or fiction. There is a danger in such bipolar thinking, of course, but the fact that bipolar thinking does occur means that most people have at least a notion of one other side of any idea.

One of the things the thinking teacher tries to inculcate into children is that most ideas can be denied, refuted, contradicted, and questioned, and many attempts are usually made to point out to children that counter distinctions to all things and ideas appear in print, too. Similarly, it would be lunatic to say with any degree of certainty that reading is a neutral activity. But a distinction must be made so that the skill, the process, the potential, is neutral until put into action. That is, until it is applied to a certain set of ideas, a certain body of knowledge, a certain content, reading skill is latent.

Postman points out that "among every 100 students who learn to read, . . . no more than one will employ the process toward any of the lofty goals which are customarily held before us." If this is so, then I have to conclude that education has failed even more miserably than its most outspoken critics assert. But if he is right, and if reading is the culprit in this dismal failure, it is incumbent upon Postman to show that the multimedia approach to learning and the abandonment of reading would raise the one to one hundred ratio even to two to one hundred. He ought to at least assert that two out of one hundred in a multimedia approach would seek the lofty goals that we believe in. This he does not do.

It is unfair to base today's position regarding the printed word on an idea expressed by Socrates some two millenia ago. Perhaps Postman has forgotten that Socrates lived in an elitist "democracy." The written word of Socrates' time is not quite the printed word of today. Since that long-ago period the written word has been used for good by Martin Luther, by Tom Paine and Tom Jefferson, and by King John, to cite four examples on one side, and by Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Schicklgruber on the other.

Yes, reading is a very antisocial activity. But a good reader does participate in the argument that the writer has presented. As a matter of fact, this is one mark of the good reader and one objective of teaching reading in the schools. Aspects of this participation have been studied by Philip Jackson, who has also analyzed the antisocial and solitary makeup of reading. The school's weakness in this regard has been its failure to take into account these characteristics.

I find Postman's argument that reading anesthetizes the reader a fallacious one. His citation of two examples from McLuhan does not help the cause, for among the younger generation nothing anesthetizes quite as much as the LP record and the television. These media have not revolutionized our society nearly to the extent the printed word did when it first appeared 450 years ago or to the extent it still does today. Contrary to Postman's position, television and the LP record have not released tremendous energies and caused people to seek new ways of organizing their institutions. They may have given us another way of looking at them, but our ideas about our institutions have remained basically unchanged.

One of the more exciting and, to some, one of the more dastardly occurrences in 1971 was the disclosure of the Pentagon papers, position papers written during the Kennedy administration and kept secret until they were disclosed without authorization. The question I ask is whether the reaction to the disclosure and to the papers themselves would have been any different and whether there would have been an outcry of greater volume if, rather than the Pentagon papers, Pentagon tapes had been revealed. I think not. Perhaps the disclosure of tapes would

have led to a movie starring an aging Sean Connery or a younger and more virile Burt Reynolds, but I think the net effect on our society both for and against this action would have been the same. A different medium would have mattered little.

I am puzzled by Postman's assertion that print is not dead, just old. The possibility of print leading to involvement, radicalism, artistic innovation, and institutional upheaval is ever present. The possibility of these things being brought about by tapes, by television, by records, or by motion pictures to me is no greater than it is for print. The content with which one must deal, whether politics, religion, sex, greed, avarice, or art, and the point of view of the speaker or writer to me are the chief determinants. I detest the war in Vietnam and find the behavior of our governmental leaders as despicable and indefensible as anyone under thirty, or over thirty, but I have never listened to an LP record by Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, or Phil Ochs. Once or twice I have seen Seeger and Baez on television. The point is that LP records may have marshalled the young in their hatred of the Vietnam encounter, but that hatred has also been generated by other media and other sources. It may be true that in certain quarters ". . . the electric plug is causing all hell to break loose," but in many other quarters hell has broken loose without the electric plug. Vietnam may indeed be our first television war and it may indeed be the most unpopular war in our history, but I think even without television or LP records it may have been unpopular. Some say it has become unpopular in spite of television. The cause and effect is not nearly so clear as Postman asserts. Seeger, Dylan, and the others may have become the gurus of peace not because of their LP records but because of reports which have been written about them and their records, reports which have appeared primarily in print.

The same may be said about the young parish priests who have taken to instructing their bishops in the ways of both man and God, the post-television college sophomores who for a moment or two usurped the authority of college presidents, and the black people who have been attempting to shake off 350 years of bondage. Television has

helped all of these groups in their causes. But so did newspaper stories and photographs. So did magazine articles that inflamed, excited, and spurred them on. It would be interesting to find out directly from those involved whether the Berrigan brothers, Father James Groppi, Caesar Chavez, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King would readily state that the electronic revolution in television, LP records, and tapes helped them directly in their antiestablishment efforts, and how much.

Of course we do have an overemphasis on reading in our schools. Articles by the hundreds and speeches by the thousands tell teachers to make greater use of other media, and untold numbers of them heed the advice to good effect. But to condemn teachers as opting for political and social stasis because of their great reliance on the printed word is a gross distortion. Teachers are doing too much with contemporary biographies, with contemporary black, Chicano, and Indian literature, and with protest literature for the charge to be a valid one. Of course there is a lot of crap in print in the schools, but there is just as much in cassettes, on slide strips, and on microfiche. Crap is crap, no matter what the medium.

And far more teachers are wise enough not to equate literacy with intelligence than Postman can believe. For some fifteen years now we have been focusing on the so-called disadvantaged or the unfairly-treated-from-the-ghettos to still say that just because they cannot read or they cannot spell they are necessarily unintelligent. I cannot say this of all teachers, of course, but Postman should not have done this either. Moreover, all of us know that reading teachers are not the smartest people around, but we do have the feeling that the smartest people are readers. They have more ideas, more points of view, more information than do nonreaders.

And it's *not* obvious to me that the number of nonreaders in the country will increase. It is easy to lie with statistics, however. The number of nonreaders may increase over the number today, simply because there will be more children in our society. But all evidence points to a decrease in the percentage of nonreaders out of the total. If I didn't believe this, if I had no hope, I'd get out of education.

I find it totally irrelevant in this discussion that kids are spending a billion dollars a year on LPs and movies. It is obvious to me at least that most of them are not seeking aesthetic experiences by their purchases. The range of reasons for their spending this much money is very great. It is not monolithic. I do know that, in spite of the millions of records that they listen to and hundreds of movies that they go to, a literary experience may still indeed be the only aesthetic experience for many of them, and frequently these literary experiences are provided for them only in the schools. But a school is in trouble if this is the only type of reading experience it gives them. Perhaps what is called for is a new definition of "human being" and of "literacy." To me so far the most workable definitions are those that include a notion of linguistic fluency and the ability to read. I'd be curious to hear Postman's definition.

After a quarter of a century in public education I find that the soothsayers and the critics of public education have two prime characteristics. The first of these is that they constantly find a single ingredient which will revolutionize (meaning improve) education, and the second is that they are simplistic in their criticism of public education. I think Postman meets both of these requisites. My travels to schools have led me to several educational circuses where the walls have been pulled down, where children are grouped by activities, interests, and other common bonds. The learning which took place therein was by many standards better learning. In these schools sometimes electronic devices were in evidence, but sometimes they were not. My travels have also led me to very dingy schools, erected shortly after the beginning of this century, where materials were in short supply and electronic devices were not in evidence at all, and I had to marvel at the quality of teaching and the quality of learning that was going on in these buildings. Most of the difference in my judgment occurred because of the human being who stood before the class or who sometimes sat in the rear—the teacher.

Let me assert as forcibly as I can that I am not against the "electric circus" that Postman advocates. It might work, and it has. But it might not. I think the human ingredient cannot be overlooked, and there will always be

the necessity for winnowing the chaff from the germs of teaching and learning—this must be done, no matter how good the chaff may be, no matter what the medium. I am not against multimedia literacy. But I find Postman's statement of ends—"expressing intellectual interest and competence"—not terribly convincing or satisfying. Postman asserts, but does not prove, that standardized tests will disappear under a multimedia approach to education. I think he is incorrectly assuming that standardized tests can be prepared only for printed material.

It is not true that new methods of instruction necessarily will evolve because of multimedia teaching or learning. To believe this is to believe that inherent in a medium is the teaching approach that must be used with it. His description of what the new program would look like is, again, a gross oversimplification. It may or it may not be as he describes it. Postman also lets himself fall into an either-or trap when he suggests that cinematography replace English literature, and he errs in his assumption that in a school in which multimedia is the hub everyone will learn. Perhaps they will listen. Perhaps they will see. Perhaps they will press the "on" and "off" buttons, but whether or not they will learn is a moot question. His catchall approach asserts that the new media will damage the bureaucratic and hierarchical arrangements found in contemporary schools. Maybe so. Maybe not.

And, of course, Postman levels the charge, used by most critics, that contemporary schools deliberately use their programs to keep certain groups from learning and "in their place." There *are* teachers who don't give a damn about certain children or certain groups of children, and there *are* teachers who are criminally inept in what they teach and how they teach it. But I think it's arrant nonsense to say that schools deliberately, knowingly, and consciously attempt to keep children from learning. Neither do schools attempt to keep kids from reading. The fine material being included in some of the new basal readers, the new materials that are being developed by individual teachers and by learning corporations, the new approaches that are being undertaken in hundreds of schools around the country—all give the lie to this position. For more

years than I can remember the schools have been advocating that teachers begin where the students are, begin with what they know, and then attempt to teach them as much as they can and to move them in their intellectual development as far as they can from their current immaturity.

In conclusion, I say again that I found Postman's article intriguing but at times infuriating because of its overstatement and naivete. I am disturbed by my inability to answer to my own satisfaction and for the conviction of others thoughtful, wise, albeit misguided critics like Neil Postman. I say again that I regret having to read his article rather than hearing firsthand his talk or being able to play a cassette of it. I fear I have used orangutan mentality or at least the orangutan approach in responding. In a cage the orangutan explores every inch of the concrete or other wall surrounding him, and then he digs at any small crack or imperfection until he is able to poke one of his limbs through it. Having done so apparently satisfies him.

This response is lengthy not because of any limitations in the reading process or in writing. Rather it is an indication of the limitations of our language. These limitations, of course, carry over to the medium of print and to all communication media. Postman does not suggest how to overcome such limitations.

# The Postman Portrait

*Robert E. Beck*

*Polonius.* Your noble son is mad.
Mad call I it; for, to define true madness,
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?
But let that go.
*Gertrude.* More matter, with less art.

It would be maddening to undertake the differentiation on a literal level between matter and art in "The Politics of Reading," but perhaps something akin to the author's own method can be drawn upon to define the madness of his message.

If a mother gives her son a camera for his birthday, and if no one else happens to be around—Dad, say, being away on a business trip; the cat having hidden herself beneath the house with her newborn litter; even faithful old Spot having gone out for an unaccustomed afternoon stroll—the boy might be driven by impatience to say, "Hey, Mom! Let me try this out on *you*!"

Assuming he had already mastered the problems of focus, aperture size, and shutter speed, the boy would

*Robert E. Beck is Chairman of the English Department at John Swett High School, Crockett, California.*

still have to choose a specific manner in which to depict his subject. Should Mom be shown outdoors cutting chrysanthemums or sweeping the sidewalk or washing windows? Should she be shown indoors, by flashcube light, setting the table or dusting the piano or cleaning the bathroom? And from what angle should the shot be snapped? Would the holly tree or the clothesline provide the more suitable background? Should the photographer include great grandmother's handsome platform rocker, or should he show instead the broken lampshade and the worn place on the carpet?

Such questions as these naturally presented themselves to Neil Postman when he composed his group portrait of reading, the public schools, and American politics.

The completed picture represents one consideration with enough accuracy so that the rest of us can identify it readily: there are indeed close family ties among the three subjects. It delineates a second with which we must certainly concur in principle, although scarcely in degree: none of the three subjects is by any stretch of the imagination flawless. In other respects, however, the portrait is distorted.

See how Postman poses his subjects, making sure that each appears as unattractive as possible. Notice how skillfully he accentuates any weakness of jaw, any tendency toward a hooked nose, any blemish in complexion. Observe the negative artistry with which he excludes mitigating details and background matter.

*Item:* Postman creates his picture without regard for the question how, prior to the evolution of his postliterate utopia, anyone could humanely withhold from children the means by which to function in an environment still dependent upon the printed word.

*Item:* Postman maneuvers adroitly around the fact that cool media can be—and frequently are—at least as "untrue, bigoted, reactionary, and . . . untenable . . ." as anything found in print.

*Item:* Postman ignores additional logical considerations. For example, if reading is actually responsible for youthful suicides, drug abuse, and "dropping out" in America, then it follows that the same cause should have

the same dire effects in other literate nations around the world.

Why does the portraitist treat his subjects with such manifest ill will?

We must take into account the temper of the period in which the remarks were first prepared. The time was unquestionably out of joint. Wherever one turned, one faced—and felt—anxiety, anger, and anguish over American politics and American society in general. The war in Vietnam, the unequal treatment of minority people, the bitter irony of poverty in the midst of opulence, the rampant pollution of the environment—all these tragic circumstances (even at the present writing lamentably unresolved) worked together in that time to create a genuine crisis of confidence about institutions which were failing to perform the functions America had entrusted to them. Perhaps only during the pre-Civil War period and during the Great Depression had so many of our people felt so deeply alarmed, frustrated, and enraged in the consciousness of their nation's errors and deficiencies. The desperation was, as we all remember, at its most intense on overcrowded college campuses, among draft-aged students and their beleaguered professors. Multitudes were shouting "Right on!" to the pundit who had declared, " 'My country, right or wrong, my country?' That is as absurd as to say, 'My mother, drunk or sober, my mother!' " With "The Politics of Reading" Postman added his voice to the chorus.

The article reminds us now of the ruthless poster widely circulated at that time caricaturing Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson as the gun-toting Bonnie and Clyde. In the Postman picture, however, the touring car is replaced as background by a surreal landscape: Tabby and her newborn kittens hang side by side from the clothesline; chrysanthemums are used to sweep the sidewalk; unwashed dinner dishes are stacked in the toilet bowl.

Even taking into account the period during which the remarks originated, their effect suggests that whether or not the wind is southerly Postman has forgotten how to know a hawk from a handsaw. He seems genuinely to assume, for example, that teachers of reading, in their role as "most sinister political group," are utterly deficient

in his own fine sensitivity to injustice, inequality, deprivation, and depredation. Why? Apparently because when reading teachers urge students to hate war, prejudice, hunger, and ecological destruction, the encouragement is not accompanied by persuasion that students despair forever of their society's eventually purging itself of its most conspicuous evils and errors, rerouting its course toward more worthy ends.

How much of this madness is matter and how much art? Is Postman only pretending to believe that either the reading teachers or the schools function in isolation from the communities that sustain them? Unless he is, how can he propose with straight face that by changing the basic media of instruction, education can alter fundamentally the message it carries? How does he imagine that political and historical myths can be eradicated simply by replacing school libraries with media centers and classrooms with electric circuses? Even if that were possible, can he really convince himself that a new education for a new society would not create its own political and historical myths? Is he truly unaware that in the end the community itself selects the manner in which its schools will serve to characterize its image? Does he suppose for a moment that a school board which has chastised a reading teacher for using *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* would supply funds for that same teacher's school to rent or purchase the film *Dispossessed*?

In depicting reading, education, and American politics as if their essential nature can most accurately be reflected in a fun-house mirror, Postman evidently has the same bitter purpose that the boy with the new birthday camera might have for focusing it on Mom while she is in an alcoholic daze—to make her aware, by whatever means, that she has a drinking problem and that she must do something to overcome it.

Postman, then, is evidently operating on the premises from which many other critics of late-twentieth-century American society and education habitually work: that most of our institutions function in a standardized, authoritarian, dehumanizing way and that that way is best illustrated in the most grotesque examples available.

It may be true that poor old Mom tipples now and then. If she does, should we simply wash our hands of her? Shouldn't we at least ask why? Could it be that she is fed to the teeth with the endless carping to which she is subjected? She missed a little dust on the piano. She left some unwashed dishes in the sink. She didn't finish cleaning the bathroom. She forgot the salt shaker when she set the table. She didn't wash *all* the windows or sweep the *whole* sidewalk. The chrysanthemums she cut have aggravated Dad's hay fever—or Spot's. Are her oversights and inadequacies such black ingrained spots as will not leave their tinct? Do they justify a portrait such as this?

> Peace! sit you down
> And let me wring your heart;
> . . . If damned custom have not brazed it so
> That it is proof and bulwark against sense.

There may be a gentler, more diplomatic, and more efficacious way to make Mom realize that drinking does not become her.

There surely are more things of value in American education than are dreamt of in the philosophy expressed by "The Politics of Reading." It would be hard to find a school in which a fair percentage of the teachers are not already continuously making efforts at "helping young people to resolve some of their more wrenching emotional problems." One need not search far to find a school where "*everybody*, including the adults, is trying to learn something." Show me an American community with a genuine commitment to confront problems, to focus its attention upon the future, and to anticipate change, and I will show you in that community a school that is "problem-centered, *and* future-centered, *and* change-centered."

All teachers and all schools should emulate these. That is as clearly apparent as the fact that Mom should be a paragon, not only of efficiency and thoughtfulness, but also of morality, wisdom, patience, justice, mercy, probity, and sobriety. Yet it is equally obvious that the institutions and systems we have created to govern ourselves, to school our children, and to communicate with one another are so incredibly complex—and our ideals for them so sharply varied—that none of them can be expected ever to achieve

everything all of us might wish it would, even when electric circuses prevail. But simple sanity urges that we strengthen and improve those institutions and systems we have rather than fly to others that we know not of.

Whose side am *I* on ? Not yours, Neil Postman, when you curse a darkness that emanates more from your own interpretation of "reality" than from the subjects you focus upon. Light a candle! Your flash cube, regardless how dazzling, is too short-lived properly to illuminate a reliable vision of the better education and the more admirable American society we all insist upon developing for the Third Millenium!

# Wow, Man! or Smile! You're on World Camera!

*John Donovan*

Gotta get the message to the folks. Gotta get it to them fast, too.
Like information and everything else, man.
Tell them everything they gotta know.
Like how to live operative-like.
Like get along.
You know. Like one and one, and what they make.
What do they make?
You know.
Outta sight.
Quick like a bunny.
"Quick like a bunny." What kinda talk's that?
Heard it.
Where?
I dunno.
Outta sight.
You read the paper?
Sure, man.
What paper?

*John Donovan is the Executive Director of the Children's Book Council, Inc.*

*Screw*, man.
Screw you, man.
Outta sight.
You see The Man in China?
On TV.
You see the way he and the Missus walked along that wall?
On TV.
That was something.
On TV.
Why do you suppose The Man did that?
Like the elections, man.
Don't complicate my life, man.
What's complicated?
I mean like The Man and his Missus took that walk on the wall so there'd be some good stuff on TV.
Outta sight.
Got some new records?
Got one or two.
Let's hear them.
OK.

(There's several minutes of really terrific music. The guys sort of move around the room where they are. They're alone, see, so there aren't any chicks to dance with. They close their eyes from time to time, really shaking themselves up. They finally stop dancing by themselves; like it doesn't make sense to dance alone. They cut off the music.)

Man, that's great.
Outta sight.
There's good and bad, man.
Right.
Everything's one or the other.
Right, man.
Gotta get rid of the bad.
Right on.
What's bad, man?
Like, you know.
Come on. What's bad?
OK.

(The two guys don't talk for several minutes. They like snicker, so that each will know that the other is like

thinking. They also nod their heads a lot, as though they're agreeing with each other.)

Like the Commie Fascists.

Right, man.

(They snicker again and nod in agreement.)

Like . . .

What?

I dunno, man.

(The guys stop smiling. They turn on their TV. The sound comes. The guys smile at each other. Some grey, foggy images flicker on. The guys start to laugh.)

That's beautiful, man.

Outta sight.

(The picture on TV clears.)

Lookie there!

It's the new President.

He's the greatest.

How come *Edith* Bunker's not with him?

(The guys stare at the TV. An hour passes. The telephone rings, but neither of them answers it. Gradually, and like simultaneously, their mouths open and their chins fade into their necks.)

Wow.

Right on.

(The guys fall asleep. Each has the same dream, that begins and ends, for each, at the same moment. Elitist, politicized reading teachers surround them. They are cutting up basal readers and giving the back of their hands to Individualized Reading Schemes, I.T.A., the Nebraska Curriculum, and a variety of other approaches to reading. In due course, these pedagogues are surrounded by an alluring octopess wearing several hot pants, balancing a TV set on her dome. There's a pretty lady on the TV. She says, over and over again, "Get with it!" The reading teachers begin to pick up the pretty lady's refrain, but with a minor variation. "I'm with it!" they call out. "How so?" says the pretty lady. "I'm teaching rock 'n' roll reading!" "You're with it!" the pretty lady says. She smiles at the reading teachers because she is happy about them. Happy is good; sad is not. The pretty TV lady thumbs her nose at sad, but

she wants to get off-camera before doing that. The guys, in their dreams, saw what the pretty lady did off-camera, so they woke up.)

I'm going to California.

Isn't everyone?

(There is an everlasting silence. Eventually the unread books, that offered like choices, alternatives, and like that, turned to dust. But there was a lot of noise left. And a lot to see, too.)

Outta sight.

Groovy.

# The Politics of Ignorance

*Frank Smith*

In "The Politics of Reading" Postman suggests that schools should relinquish their concern with written language literacy—which he thinks is "political"—especially since a poor job is made of reading instruction and since electronic communications technology has made written language obsolete. While I shall briefly argue that Postman's pronouncements are ill-founded, my major purpose will be to place the issue of literacy within a far more general context.

Postman addresses himself to a *symptom* of the malaise that afflicts our schools, not to the cause. His electronic panacea would aggravate the complaint rather than cure it. I see only one political issue in education—and only one educational issue in politics—an issue that for want of a better word can be called *ignorance*. The question is not whether teachers should try to inculcate reading—or any other skill—in students, but the extent to which they should be permitted to contaminate children with the most contagious of social diseases, mental stultification.

*Frank Smith is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada.*

Children do not arrive at school ignorant, though they may arrive illiterate. Whether or not they leave school illiterate, they frequently leave it ignorant, which is the state in which the more "successful" of them may enter universities and other institutions of higher ignorance, some in due course to return to the classroom and spread the infection to another generation of children.

### *The Ignorance Explosion*

First, some criterial attributes of ignorance. Ignorance is not a matter of not knowing, but of not knowing that you don't know or mistakenly believing that you do know, or that at least some expert somewhere does know. Ignorance is not so much not knowing an answer as not knowing the question, not being able to think when thinking is required. Ignorance is a blind dependence that someone else will be able to tell you what to do.

There is far more ignorance in the world today than ever before. Contemporary man finds himself in many more situations in which he believes he has or expects to be given solutions that in fact are non-existent or constitute more complex problems. Where once there was uncertainty about how to organize the economy of a feudal demesne, in today's megalopoli we are totally ignorant about making life bearable or even possible. Once we wrestled with the problem of winning local wars; today we have no idea how to survive peace. Limited transportation was once an unavoidable inconvenience; today the automobile chokes us. In place of occasional famine we eat foods essentially devoid of nourishment. Once we knew no better than to allow sewage to befoul the streets. Today we have invented so many kinds of artificial excrement that neither the oceans nor the air around us can accommodate it. Schools were once unsure about the best use of slate, a modest ignorance which contemporary technology has expanded through an incredible range of electronic gadgetry. The intelligence of the world is boggling under the brunt of what is incautiously called "information"—a proliferation of negative entropy that makes it just about impossible to separate the true from the false, the real

from the fantastic, the relevant from the rubbish. Our environment is clogged with nonsense.

But while ignorance abounds, it is by no means uniformly distributed. Ignorance is directly related to what you need to know, or to what you presume to know. The villager may not be able to direct the tourist to the nearest roadhouse, but it is not the villager who is lost. The doctor is ignorant, not the patient. And as I have already asserted, children do not come to school ignorant. The majority arrive, God help them, ready, willing, and able to learn. They have already resolved intellectual problems of astounding complexity—should we pause to think about it—ranging from mastering a language to organizing a coherent theory of the world around them, including their own place in it. They are adept at making sense of the world, at relating what is new to what they know already. They can cope.

Long before infants acquire control of their bladders they demonstrate an intellectual awareness, flexibility, and responsiveness that is the very antithesis of ignorance. Children can think long before they come to school. The first time most children meet nonsense in their lives is in the classroom (some basal reading systems pride themselves on the fact that their content is meaningless). Learning is not meaningful to many kids in school, any more than teaching is meaningful to many teachers. The first lesson that many children learn is "Don't think, do as I tell you," just as the teachers themselves have been taught "Don't think, someone else will tell you what to do" (the concept of "leadership"). But I am getting ahead of my argument.

As I was saying, ignorance is not distributed equally in this world. It is relative to the situation you are in, a function of your aspirations and expectations. In particular, ignorance is clustered in our educational institutions.

*Ignorance in Education*

Two kinds of ignorance may be distinguished in education and conveniently labelled soft- and hard-core. Soft-

core ignorance, which tends to be found in schools, is the ignorance of those who feel they need to be told what to do. Many teachers are trained to be ignorant, to rely on the opinions of experts or "superiors" rather than on their own judgment. The questions I am asked after lectures to teachers (on the topic of reading) are always eminently *practical*—how should reading be taught, which method is best, and what should be done about a real-life child of eight who has the devastating misfortune to read like a statistically fictitious child of six? Teachers do not ask the right kind of question—instead of asking what they should *do*, which can never be answered with the generality they expect, they should ask what they need to *know* in order to decide for themselves. (It is a monument to the efficiency of the brainwashing that teachers receive during their training that they are practically immune to insult on the topic of their own intellectual capacity. The only time teachers express surprise or disbelief is when it is suggested that their own experience and intuition might be as good a guide for action as the dogma of some expert.)

Soft-core ignorance is not restricted to teachers. It is reflected at all levels of education in the pathetic faith that electronic technology will provide the answers to all problems (instead of creating more problems). A senior officer of the International Reading Association recently waxed lyrical regarding his board's joint exploration with the Boeing Aerospace Group of "the possible applications of space-age telecommunications technology to help eradicate world illiteracy"—as if space engineers must be privy to some cabalistic knowledge about teaching reading. Man may not have got to the moon before the age of computers and systems analysis, but kids have been learning to read for centuries. Every method of teaching reading ever devised has worked with some children (which only goes to prove how adaptable children are). We do not need to find something different to do in the future, but rather to discover what we have been doing right in the past. We talk as if it was a miracle that any child ever learns to read. But if we think about the facility with which most "illiterates" learned to talk, it might appear more remarkable that educators are able to arrange an environment in

which so many children consistently fail to learn to read.

Soft-core ignorance, then, is the expectation that someone else can be relied upon to solve your practical problems and save you the trouble of thinking. Hard-core ignorance, on the other hand, is the belief that you know the answers to all problems and can do the thinking for other people. And hard-core ignorance is concentrated at the upper levels of our educational hierarchy (I use the term in its literal sense of a priesthood), notably in the universities.

In my experience, the promiscuity with which teachers are willing to be seduced by some overqualified outsider is exceeded only by the avidity with which academics from a range of totally irrelevant disciplines have their intellectual way with teachers. Nowhere is ignorance of the reading process more pronounced than among the linguists, psychologists, systems analysts, and brain surgeons who are prepared to tell reading teachers how to teach reading. The degree of Ph.D., it often seems to me, is a license to practice ignorance. (I am not prejudiced. Some of my best friends are ignoramuses, though I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one.)

*Some Specifics of Educational Ignorance*

After such generalities, I shall now talk briefly about ignorance with respect to reading, reading instruction, electronic instructional technology, and the role of schools, all of which will give an opportunity to make at least a few points relevant to the Postman article.

Reading is a highly obscure topic closely surrounded by a dense fog of pedagogical mystique and mythology. Learning to read is frequently confused with reading instruction—the vast majority of books on "reading" or the psychology thereof are thinly disguised tracts of instructional dogma. It is a typical teacher's error to confuse what is done in school with what a child learns. The most that can be said for any method of reading instruction that succeeds—and, as I have said, all methods succeed with some children—is that somebody must be doing something right.

More dangerous are the widespread beliefs that a child will not learn unless told exactly what to do—which is obviously and fortunately false, because no one knows enough about reading to tell a child what to do—and that there must be something wrong with a child who does not learn to read.

There is a good deal to say about the reading process that I have no space to elaborate upon here, although I have tried to do so elsewhere.[1] I shall list just a few points to give a flavor of them, and hopefully whet an appetite or two: reading is not primarily decoding to sound, nor do the eyes play a primary role in reading. Reading by "phonics" is demonstrably impossible (ask any computer). Reading places an impossible burden upon the visual system and upon memory unless the reader is able to read fast, without an undue concern for literal accuracy, and with comprehension as immediate as it is for spoken language. Memorization interferes with comprehension, and so do "comprehension tests." Children learn to read by reading, and the sensible teacher makes reading easy and interesting, not difficult and boring.

I shall make four blanket assertions that may raise a good many hackles but that I regard as easily defensible—the fact that they are widely ignored and even suppressed in education would be a prime argument for the prosecution if I were trying to convict schools of criminal ignorance: A child does not need to be very intelligent to learn to read. A child does not need to be very mature to learn to read. A child does not need to come from a socially or economically superior home, or to have literate parents, in order to learn to read. A child does not need to wait to get to school to learn to read.

Most teachers of reading *know* the preceding statements are true, even if they are not familiar with the published sources—Durkin, Fowler, Moore, Torrey. But in any case, if you think intelligence, maturity, "experience," and skilled adult supervision are necessary for learning to read, how



[1] Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) and *Psycholinguistics and Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

do you think an infant learns the much more complex skills of spoken language? As many parents in North America are discovering, a child has a reading problem only if he is still unable to read when he gets to school.

In short, all the evidence indicates that it is not so much inadequacy on the part of children that makes learning to read such a hassle as the way in which we expect them to learn—through instructional procedures that systematically deprive them of relevant practice and necessary information. The more difficulty a child experiences in learning to read, the less reading and the more nonsense drills we typically arrange for him to do.

Rather than pausing to reflect upon where the fault really lies, however, it is becoming fashionable these days to respond with a whatthehell, what's the need for children to learn to read in any case attitude. Postman, for example, suggests that written language has lost all utility as a medium of communication. Nevertheless, he entrusts his own messages to print and obviously expects someone to read them. He asserts that "an important function of teaching reading is to make students accessible to political and historical myth," without noting that reading might also provide grounds for rejecting such myth. One inestimable advantage of writing is that it forces the writer to make *statements* which can then be examined, analyzed, and even evaluated. Criticism is inherently a literary mode. It may be true—though I would dispute it—that written language appeals more to reason than to the emotions, but is this an argument against reading (any more than the opposite is an argument for or against electronic media)?

The fact that relatively few people may currently take advantage of reading seems to me irrelevant. It is almost certainly a consequence of the way reading is taught. There is information and knowledge and pleasure in print—not just in novels, but in newspapers, magazines, comics, programs, menus, directories, scripts, scenarios, letters, notices, and graffiti. Even Postman would include books in his brave new resource centers, despite his uncertainty about who might read them. He even suggests that being able to read might somehow be degrading, that it makes the individual a tool of his government, or of any bureaucrat.

But is illiteracy any better? Once again, I think he confuses the reading process with the consequences of the way we teach reading. The price of literacy need not be the reader's free will and intelligence.

Postman further argues that written language has been misused and worn out, that the world is full of written garbage. But people need not read everything that has been written—one advantage of being able to read is that you can be selective. It may be true that reprints of Postman's paper will help to clutter thousands of useless filing cabinets, never to be looked at again. But one of the more dubious benefits of the electronic revolution is that neither the spoken word nor the visual gesture will remain biodegradable in the future. Students armed with cassette recorders and video cameras will record every cough and scratch. If ever there were media that inundated themselves the moment they were created, it was audio and video taping, open invitations to capture the trivial for posterity. One advantage of old fashioned manual media like writing and painting is that they require *effort*; squirting a video camera at "life" is an indiscriminate way of being creative.

It is a fallacy to assume that anything written language can do video tape can do better. There is good and bad grammar in film just as in written language, and there is at least as much ignorance about film. It is fallacious to believe that either film or television gives more information than writing. *Different media do not convey the same information about the same event*, but offer different perspectives. This is a most important point that I cannot pursue here, though I highly recommend several chapters in the 1974 NSSE Yearbook on media and symbols.[2]

All media are selective—you take your choice whether you see an event through the eye of the writer or of the cameraman. One beauty of written language is the manner in which it is selective. We tend to overlook how much information words give us about context, about what is



[2] David R. Olson, editor, *Media and Symbols: The Forms of Expression, Communication, and Education*, 73rd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, in press).

said "between the lines." Words give more information than pictures because they can take so much account of what the reader already knows. When I view a documentary, I need a spoken or written commentary to tell me what I should be looking at and how to relate it to what I know.

Any notion that film provides a particularly veridical or unadulterated image of "life" or "experience" is naive—where does the "creativity" come in? Reading about a good meal does not reduce hunger, but neither does a picture of it. Movies do not automatically enhance our experience, whether of the Vietnam conflict or of sex. A competent writer may give a reasonable impression of what it is like to eat a gourmet meal, suffer a napalm attack, or make love, while an incompetent movie producer might do little more than illustrate the movements involved. (Will electronic exercises teach children that the art of any medium is to use the receiver's imagination?) Vietnam was the world's most televised war, but "bringing it into the living room" did not seem to end it any sooner. Could the fact that there was little written literature on Vietnam—as opposed to "factual reporting"—have anything to do with the way the war was tolerated, regardless of demonstrations, which were themselves televised into visual tedium?

Postman himself admits that nobody knows what the consequence would be of turning schools into electric circuses. Nor does he mention that the experiment has already been tried to a certain extent and has failed. During the past decade most new and many old facilities in schools and universities were decked out with audiovisual novelty, much of it never used and now being taken out. And just as much ignorance is being displayed in dismantling the electronic sideshows as was involved in their establishment. Hard-core ignorance is not exclusive to written language experts.

While not arguing that reading is a substitute for electronic media, I deny the opposite. I am certainly not "anti-media," though I reject any assertion of blind faith in the virtue of any medium, including writing. Electronic illiteracy is as debasing as the inability to read—and infinitely

more probable given the present level of ignorance in education. I am not even arguing that schools should continue trying to teach reading, simply that reading cannot be replaced by television and the tape recorder. I might prefer to argue that literacy in any medium is too precious to leave to our schools and to political propagandists.

As Postman implies, we have scarcely any idea today of what schools are for. We do not know what we should do in schools. We do not even understand what we are doing in schools. Ignorance abounds. Not only do we not understand why hundreds of thousands of children fail to learn to read each year, we have no idea what happens with the hundreds of thousands of children who succeed. Practically everything we try to teach in educational institutions we teach ineptly. If we succeed at all, it can be reasonably predicted that the student will not want to practice what he has learned or will do so reluctantly. And there is absolutely no evidence that we will do any better if we encourage our students to film and tape record everything in sight.

Don't talk about master teachers, love of learning, respect for knowledge, or academic integrity—these are more than exceptions within the modern system; they are freaks, aberrations. Schools are training institutions, managed by teachers who are themselves taught in training institutions, and the entire perverse and misbegotten process is founded on the premise that no one should actually think. *That* is the political issue.

The prime concern of schools is getting through the day. Schools are not concerned with literacy, nor with creativity, nor with intelligence, except as items on tests or in end-of-term reports. Superintendents and trustees are concerned with buildings, budgets, and enrollment projections. Principals are concerned with pacification, keeping the lid on, and maintaining stability. And teachers are concerned with discipline and control; how could they be otherwise, since thinking is an individual activity that produces unmanageable oddballs, whether in the classroom or in the staffroom? At every level there is only one concern; it involves neither "learning" nor the child—it is good administration. I know there are exceptions, but the

discussion is not about exceptions, nor can most school systems tolerate them.

Schools make a poor job of teaching reading, suggests Postman, so why not release teachers from that burden and entrust them instead with something important, something "relevant," like "helping young people to resolve some of their more wrenching emotional problems"? One can only wonder how anyone could think it is only literacy that schools can foul up. Will teachers be good for anything except distributing popcorn if we make them ushers in an electric circus?

### *The Alternative to Ignorance*

The opposite of ignorance is not knowledge, which is either a dead end or a route to new ignorance. The opposite of ignorance is understanding—an active verb—achieved only through awareness and thought. And awareness and thought are not faculties that you acquire from experts or skills that can be taught in schools. Rather they are aspects of human nature that are inherent in all children—until they are drilled out of them by a process that is called socialization.

The opposite of ignorance is keeping the mind alive, always considering alternatives, never shutting the system down. It is remembering that every question might be put differently, that authority is not necessarily right, and that superficial glibness (including this paper and Postman's) is not necessarily erudition. The opposite of ignorance is never to rest content doing something you do not understand.

I am not arguing for the unattainable. Being told what to do is a good short run solution in an emergency situation, such as changing a tire or floating off the roof in a flood. But education should not be an emergency situation, and even if no one is really sure of what is going on in the classroom, at least the question could be mutually examined by those who are most involved, the child and the teacher.

I am not proposing that the printed word should remain the keystone of education, an extreme as radical as Postman's nomination of electronic media as a substitute. I would much prefer not to make a big issue of reading instruction, or of anything else. In fact I would suggest that we forget about "teaching" for a while, or at least have a moratorium on the topic, and instead think a little about how schools might be reorganized as places where children and adults collaboratively or independently learn, a situation that would guarantee the exercise of thought. A prime focus for initial study might be how the acquisition of literacy in written language and electronic media might help the individual, teacher, or child to resist the blandishments and misinformation that daily assault all our senses. But there is much ignorance for us to think our way out of in these topics.

Let me go out even further on my self-appointed limb. Children do not learn by instruction, they learn by example, and they learn by making sense of what are essentially meaningful situations. Remember, children have been learning since birth. A child learns when he hears his mother talking to him or to a neighbor. He learns when his father lets him take a chance with a hammer and nails. He learns when he finds it necessary to check the price of sports equipment in a catalog. Always he learns in order to make sense of something, and especially when there is an example, a model, to be copied. Even when he learns to loot stores, sniff glue, or mug cripples, he does so by example and because it makes sense in his environment. If thinking or asking questions paid off, and if some good models were around, a child might even spend a few years at school doing just that—thinking and asking questions.

Encouraging people to think would be an enormously political issue. It is not one that currently occupies much of the attention of politicians, nor is it a dominant question in schools. In educational psychology, thinking is usually equated with problem solving, concept formation, and excursions to the nearest museum. The alternative to ignorance would be revolutionary in more than one sense of the word. It might even enable us to start asking the right sorts of questions about education.

Eradicating ignorance might also put a lot of experts out of business. What will be the use of having all of the right answers, even electronic ones, if people are going to start asking different kinds of questions and, worse still, to start educating their children to do the same?

*Personal Postscript*

Someone is bound to ask how ignorant this paper is, or I am. My answer depends on how the question is put. If it is boorish, I shall say that the question itself is ignorant. But otherwise, I readily admit there is a great deal I do not know (which by my definition is not ignorance, of course), and for the rest, I try to keep an open mind.

# Postman's Rhetoric: A Closer Look

*Lee Deighton*

The final paragraph of Postman's essay gives the show away. "Teachers of reading" (whoever they may be) are asked to consider these questions: What is reading good for? What is it better or worse than? What are my motives in promoting it? These are questions of deep philosophic content which get at the role of the public school in our society. They are a relevant conclusion to an essay which is primarily an attack upon the present conduct of the schools. In this setting, reading instruction is simply a convenient stick with which to beat a stubborn mule; handwriting, spelling, or social studies would have served as well.

When the argument does turn toward reading instruction, two false constructs lower its validity. First, there are no "teachers of reading" in the public schools, except for the few teachers whose work is exclusively remedial reading. The teacher who helps the elementary school child learn to read also deals with handwriting, spelling, something called "English," science, health, geography,

*Lee Deighton is Chairman of the Board of Hart Scrabble Press. He is a past Vice President of Crowell Collier and Macmillan, Inc.*

arithmetic, science, and so on. In the secondary schools reading is not a subject of instruction.

Secondly, there is no substantive content in the phrase "the politics of reading." There is no referent in common experience to which it applies. It is diversionary to speak of "teachers of reading" as "a most sinister political group" and "an important political pressure group." True, the NEA, which is composed primarily of elementary school teachers and teachers unions, does have political clout, but there is no record, I believe, of any occasion upon which these groups have lobbied for the teaching of reading. They would not need to lobby, since any serious proposal to decrease reading instruction would be denounced by parents and other taxpayers.

But irrespective of the author's tactics and strategy, he is seriously concerned about the place of reading in the public schools. On the broad front, the indictment runs thus: by "promoting the idea that literacy is the richest source of aesthetic experience" and "the idea that the main source of wisdom is to be found in libraries" the schools "have become a major force for political conservatism at a time when everything else in the culture screams for rapid reorientation and change."

There is a semantic shift here that is neither subtle nor reasonable. At the outset of the essay, "the teaching of reading" refers to instruction in the decoding of printed verbal symbols. Later, in the general indictment pertaining to aesthetic experience and sources of wisdom, the term "literacy" is substituted, and it can only refer to experiences with "literature" rather than to instruction in decoding. This semantic shift is confusing, but it is essential to the author's argument. One may agree that a disproportionate amount of time is spent in secondary schools on what passes today for "literature" and still wonder what this has to do with helping children learn how to decode printed symbols. The author finds a bridge in the stated goals of reading instruction. These stated goals, he finds to be unreal.

In his opinion "it is almost totally untrue" that "the basic purpose of reading instruction is to open the student's mind to the wonders and riches of the printed

word. . . ." Rather, he says, ". . . an important function of the teaching of reading is to make students accessible to political and historical myth."

Secondly, he argues that those who learn to read well will not put their skill to significant use: "To put it bluntly, among every 100 students who learn to read, my guess is that no more than one will employ the process toward any of the lofty goals which are customarily held before us. The rest will use the process to increase their knowledge of trivia. . . ."

Third, he objects by inference to the teaching of reading for vocational competence: "Besides, the number of jobs that require reading skill much beyond what teachers call a 'fifth grade level' is probably quite small and scarcely justifies the massive, compulsory, unrelenting reading programs that characterize most schools." It is sufficient to observe that reading programs for the most part are designed to bring children up to this level. "Massive efforts" are required to do this much. No significant amount of school time and energy goes beyond that goal, since it is assumed, rightly or wrongly, that the reader, having attained this level, is equipped to sharpen and extend his reading skills on his own.

Finally, the author objects that there is a built-in "fault" in the words and structure of the language. He quotes McLuhan as meaning that print "induces passivity and anesthetizes all our senses except the visual." Acknowledging that print was once capable of arousing action, he concludes, "For us, print is the technology of convention." A striking metaphor, but it ignores the practical action consequences of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* or Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, books of our time.

What shall we do to be saved? The author's solution is to turn away from print to newer media. The Age of the Printed Word, he says, is coming to an end: "Electronic media are predictably working to unloose disruptive social and political ideas, along with new forms of sensibility and expression." Hence the schools, instead of "pushing the old technology . . . with almost hysterical vigor," should become "something like an electric circus."

This route has been tried. Under provisions of NDEA, some $350 million worth of electronic equipment was poured into the nation's classrooms, from which it has since been removed to attic closets. Here and there, language laboratories work beautifully but for a sensationally declining number of students. Here and there elaborate physics laboratory equipment is opening new worlds for exploration but, again, to a sagging enrollment. Computer-assisted instruction is no longer even a conversation piece. The market for teaching machines (or learning machines) has broken. Why? Because they are so infinitely tedious and boring. You can observe, as I have observed, as many students asleep and as much chatter in a classroom equipped with television as in one equipped only with books and a teacher.

But let us suppose a classroom equipped like an "electric circus." What will be the nature of the content extruded by the apparatus? In public schools supported by onerous taxes, will there be less training for vocational competence? Will there be less exposure to the political and historical myth of the nation? Will multimedia literacy be used less often than reading skills to increase a "knowledge of trivia," to maintain a "relatively low level of emotional maturity," and so on? To suppose any of these consequences is to indulge in what the author calls "romantic nonsense."

Intuitively, one may suppose that electronic media have the capability of speeding and enriching the learning process. But no one has yet taken the trouble to work out precisely what each of the media is best capable of doing. Meantime, the Age of the Printed Word is not coming to an end, as the author asserts. There are more books, journals, and newspapers published, purchased, and read today than ever before, and the paper industry happily predicts that the growing shortage of book papers will intensify over the next five years.

Multimedia literacy is a suitable goal for today's schools, and to the degree that they resist it, they justify the author's criticisms. But multimedia literacy must surely include verbal literacy, which has always been extremely hard to come by. The solution to whatever

ills we can agree upon is not the choice of one media over another. It lies rather in the area of motivation. How do you program learning so that it requires no student effort? How do you program students to want knowledge and wisdom?

Postman's essay is neither a scholarly nor a scientific work. It was not intended to be. It is in fact a skillful rhetorical effort laced with innuendo, metaphor, and emotionally charged sentences designed to arouse his readers. It should be taken for what it is, and it cannot properly be used as the basis for revision of practice in reading instruction.

# Damn You, Neil Postman...

*Robert F. Hogan*

(1) There you go again, putting me on. Upsetting me. Making me dance for a time to your tune. I mean, like in fall 1968 when you revised your speech title at the last minute and frazzled me, not to mention (much less name!) several other people. Did NCTE really dare to print in the OFFICIAL convention program that revised speech title, "Bullshit and the Art of Crap Detection"?

Well, NCTE did. What happened? You drew to your convention session a couple of hundred more people. I had to answer three angry letters. Beginning with the following convention we gave up requiring head table guests at the annual banquet to wear formal dress. The banquet itself is now in jeopardy.

In your own way, Neil, you're good for us; but damn you. . . .

(2) Look at what's happened now. You turned over to the *Harvard Educational Review* the manuscript for a speech you gave at Lehigh attacking the teaching of

*Robert F. Hogan is the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English.*

reading. The *Review* printed it. A lot of people read it. At least the seven of us whose efforts are gathered here, like seven pecks of produce from seven different gardens, not only read it, but reread it, and pored over its parts. (I didn't mean that pun, but I like it now and so I'll leave it in.) We then wrote seven *more* articles, which we hope you and others will read.

Do you think that's weird—your piece against reading triggering seven more things to be read? Of course you don't. Not you, Neil.

(3) You ask, "What is reading good for?" You might as well ask, "What is a car good for?" Same answer: "Almost anything."

Consider the car. It's good for getting from here to anywhere within two hundred miles when the planes aren't flying and Amtrak is unconscionably late. It's good for necking in. It provides one of the most painless means of suicide and painful means of homicide, depending on how you feel about whom you want to kill. It's good for picking up hitchhikers. It's good for polluting the air. Some cars are painted yellow and display medallions, and they're good for getting to their ecology meetings those New Yorkers who wouldn't own a car. A car is just about the only way to get into a drive-in movie.

What is reading, or a car, "good" for? So many things that trying to enumerate them is like trying to count the stars with the naked eye on a clear night.

(4) But if I turn the question around slightly to ask, "Why do people read?" I can almost manage the numbers.

(4a) People read because there are things they want to know, and the cheapest, easiest way for literate people to find them out is to look them up. A truth that doesn't thrill men of letters, but a truth nonetheless, is this one: over the long run, the best selling nonfiction books in the history of American publishing have been a couple of cookbooks and Spock's book on baby care. There *are* things people want to know, need to know.

When an infant develops a rash and mounts a fever of 102° and rising in the lonely hours of the early morning, what his mother doesn't feel she needs is a multimedia experience, however totally educational that might be. She wants to know what Spock has to say. Looking it up is faster and cheaper than calling *him* up.

(4b) People read because they want to escape. It's hard to fault that desire. When life gets dreary, on top of daily, getting away is a relief. You could argue that to this end other media are more efficient. But only sometimes. Late at night when the choice is among two talk shows and Part III of the Paulette Goddard film festival, or when you have two hours to kill at LaGuardia, or when you are on the way home from a conference that has assaulted your senses, a book or magazine is a comfort.

(4c) People read because they have to. For decades adolescents read *Silas Marner* because they were naive enough to believe or smart enough to know that there was no way to pass the test if they hadn't read the book. Very often between the civil servant and a promotion, between the apprentice and his journeyman's papers, between the adolescent and his driver's license lies the book. Sometimes you just have to read.

(4d) People who know how to read, read because, whatever it is, it's there to be read. They read graffiti, advertisements on the curving ceilings of subways and on the rears and sides of buses, left-behind newspapers on trains, the backs of cereal boxes (we'll come back to the cereal boxes later).

(4e) And, finally, people—or some people—read to restore or enlarge their souls. Chapman's *Homer* did it for Keats. My own needs are more modest. For me in recent years it has been on first looking into the poems of Maxine Kumin and L. E. Sissman and into the prose (if it *is* prose) of Richard Brautigan. Whether it's just watching a master playing with language, or identifying with a kindred but infinitely more articulate person who helps order the chaos of life, it does restore and enlarge.

You would argue that other media and mixed media can do that, too, and maybe better. I'd agree with *too*, but quarrel with *better*. Have I seen short films made by young people that enlarge and restore? Sure. I've also read such poems by such people. The reason I cling to reading is at least twofold: when the impact is almost too much, with a flick of the reading eye I can relive it over and over till I've decompressed—no lifting the needle arm, no pushing the backup button, no waiting for the film to go through, rewinding it, and running it again; and when the circuits blow or when an ice storm cuts off the power for two or three days, and my hunger for restoration begins to hurt, all I need are two candles and a new poet.

(5) This leads me, Neil, to what's missing from the equation, "The medium is the message." It is blind to the varied intentions and purposes of receivers. My oldest daughter listens to Joan Baez records because she shares the horror about what's happening in Vietnam. I listen because she's sidling off into adulthood and the music and the words tell me, in ways she can't, what she's feeling (besides, listening like that is a way of keeping in touch without clutching). Her younger sister listens to the same records to fill up acoustic space while she does her spelling assignment.

The content is fixed and the medium is constant. But not so the message. Let's send ourselves through a time warp, Neil. It's premiere night for the showing of *Citizen Kane*. Somehow, you and I and my younger daughter and William Randolph Hearst and an exchange student from Latvia are all there. How many messages are there?

Do you know what's really wrong with the equation, Neil? "The medium is the message" is, of all unlikely things, *linear*. I think it may be more linear than the Massachusetts Turnpike. I'll let you know when I decide.

(6) You argue, Neil, that reading makes for docile, subservient, consumer-oriented citizens. Then how do you account for yourself? It's not reading that makes people that way but censorship, bombardment, and "management" of

news. Otherwise, why is the Saigon regime closing down instead of underwriting newspapers? Print, moreover, is but one of the media of the hucksters. It is the principal medium of Ralph Nader. If we really took away reading, we'd be left with the hucksters.

(7) Simply because we can read, and through reading, learn, we're spared the burden of much learning by way of memorization. (When you threw in Socrates' praise of memorization, you were fudging, Neil, and you know that.) I once knew the population figure for Pismo Beach. I don't anymore. Besides, it's changed since I knew it. But if I ever need to know, I know how to find out. I can read.

I've made up what I think is a new word, Neil: *obliviscendum*. If a *memorandum* is literally *something to be remembered* (memorare→memorandum), *a thing to be forgotten* is an *obliviscendum* (obliviscor→obliviscendum). What makes it comfortable and safe for literate persons to consign so many minute facts to the *obliviscendum* file is the easy confidence that they can retrieve them whenever they need to.

(8) Okay, Neil. You've made me share your dream. A cross media, multimedia literacy program would not only be a humane thing for children, but an essential thing for our times. And insofar as I understand your dream, I'll help bring it about

But now, damn you, share my dream and see if you'll help. You and I and all the kindred spirits we can muster will first decide whether it's the cereal division of Kellogg's or of General Mills that is the target. Then we recruit ten times our number. Then we all start buying stock till we control the enterprise. Then we boost the incumbent president of the corporation upstairs and install in his place someone like a Wallace Stevens, with a head for business, but a heart for poetry.

Then comes the real coup, Neil. We take over the backs of the cereal boxes for fresh new poems and accessible older poems (see #4d above). Think of it, Neil. Think of what we could do for poets and poetry.

But even more, think of what we'd be doing to and for the millions of compulsive readers who stare each morning at a lying nutritional table, rereading it long after they've memorized it, because that's all there is to read at breakfast.

(9) I'm finishing this piece on a flight from Dulles to Champaign. I'm a week late with it. Still, I paused at the bookstore to read the titles on the spines and covers of books (see #4d again). I saw at least one book that would have helped me forget the assaults of the day. Another was on a subject I want to know more about. Still another was a book I've never really read but once passed an examination on (it's strange how the guilt abides). Fortunately, none promised to restore or enlarge my soul. That might have been a temptation beyond resistance.

Conscience about the deadline (*deadline* is an ugly word if you really *read* it) for this piece persuaded me to skip the others and to finish this.

Damn you, Neil Postman . . .

# In Retrospect

*Neil Postman*

It was said once of Thomas Aquinas that he was a man singularly free of bad temper in controversy. How wonderful—if one can manage it. Among other things, it enables you to be enlarged by an argument rather than diminished by it. Well, I am no saint but, when possible, I do try to learn from adversaries, especially when they go to the trouble of instructing me so explicitly, as in the preceding essays. The difficulty in this instance is . . . well, there's no other way to say it: Outside of an elementary school remedial reading class, could you find a more perfect gaggle of point-missers, anywhere? I am accused of being mad, a hypocrite, a provocateur, unscholarly, quite probably ignorant, and even (by not-so-subtle implication) Machiavellian. Now, many of these accusations are probably true. Some of them certainly are. But all of them are completely irrelevant. So far as I can tell, the major points I made in my article still stand, hardly even ruffled by the winds of controversy.

Not that the article is unassailable. Far from it. I would like to assail it myself, not only for stating inexactly some of the things I believed three or four years ago, but also because I have since changed some of those beliefs.

But, as I said, I am no saint, and I certainly have no taste for self-flagellation. Thus, I have no intention of even trying to do properly what my colleagues were supposed to do.

Instead, I propose to respond in the following way: First, I want to discuss some of the more significant distortions presented in the preceding essays. I want to do this partly out of an unsaintly pique at the stridency and almost complete lack of generosity of those essays, and partly because some of their distortions are commonly used to evade the central issues I tried to raise and, therefore, deserve to be exposed. When I have done that, I want to try stating—once again, briefly, and in the plainest language I can command—precisely what the issues are, as I see them.

To begin with, two or three times the point was raised that I am something of a hypocrite for *writing* an article. If I believe so fervently in the power and beneficence of new media, why do I choose to express myself in such an old form? This is the kind of criticism that we used to call, in my old neighborhood, a cheap shot—going for the easy put-down while evading the substantive points of contention. Just for the record, my article is not about what medium best suits Neil Postman and other forty-year-old English teachers. In fact, I take it for granted that most of us engaged in this debate feel more emotionally and intellectually committed to print than to other media. And that is why the debate arises. The question is not about where *our* preference lies but about the preferences of our students and whether or not their preferences and ours are sufficiently dissonant to cause a serious breakdown in communication and a concomitant misdirection of educational goals.

Secondly, there is some suggestion in the respondents' essays that I have expressed the view that electronic technology will establish some kind of Utopia. I say "some suggestion" because it is not always clear to me what the respondents *are* saying. For example, Frank Smith says that soft-core ignorance is "reflected at all levels of education in the pathetic faith that electronic technology will

provide the answers to all problems (instead of creating more problems)." I am still unclear about his distinction between hard- and soft-core ignorance. But I certainly agree with him that there are no rational reasons for believing that electronic media will solve all our problems, or even most of them. In fact, in my article I state explicitly that "electronic media are predictably working to unloose disruptive social and political ideas . . ." and that "the electric plug is causing all hell to break loose." As a matter of fact, I know of no serious person who believes that technology, by itself, can have beneficent effects. Almost everyone who has written extensively on the matter—for example, Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and Peter Drucker—has taken the opposite view, that technology must be intelligently monitored and controlled if it is to solve more problems than it creates. Of course, that is one of the reasons why I argue for the schools' assuming a central role in educating youth in the structure and ecology of electronic media.

Several essayists are also under the impression that I have said that print is dead. Lee Deighton, as if to refute that rash assertion, points out that there are more books and newspapers today than ever before. Well, it so happens that I specifically say that print is not dead and point out further that in newly literate countries "print is a medium capable of generating intense involvement." Of course, I do say that *in our culture* print is old (not dead)—what I call "the technology of convention." I also assert that the Age of Print is coming to an end, by which I mean that print is no longer the main source of literary experience and cultural information for most people. To these assertions, I get the reply, from Mr. Deighton, that people still read a lot, and, from William Jenkins, that "it [is] totally irrelevant in this discussion that kids are spending a billion dollars a year on LPs and movies." Although he does not say it, I assume he would also find it totally irrelevant that by the time a child graduates from high school, he or she has spent somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand hours in front of a tele-

vision set. (I can just hear Mr. Deighton saying, "But don't forget, people still read a lot.") Okay, Mr. Deighton, people still read a lot, and if you look again at my article, you will see that in my vision of the school of the future, I suggest that electronic media literacy be given weight "at least equal to reading and writing." So, it is simply beside the point to argue over the question, Is print dead?

Moreover, it is not quite on the point to raise the question (as do Claudia Converse and Ralph Staiger), Does literacy result in movement toward personal and social liberation? Since they took such care to summarize what I wrote before replying, I am surprised that they offer the work of Paulo Freire (in Brazil and Chile) as a kind of refutation of my answer to that question (I believe they suppose my answer to be a flat "no"). As I suggested in my article and mentioned a moment ago, in newly literate countries print can work, to use David Riesman's phrase, as "gunpowder of the mind." It certainly did this for Western civilization (as I also pointed out) and no doubt will continue to do so in essentially preliterate cultures. But, of course, I am arguing that in our own culture print, for all its advantages, is a psychologically conservative medium in comparison with the electronic media.

Ms. Converse and Mr. Staiger have written a thoughtful criticism of my paper, precisely because they focus on the validity of the theory of "technological novelty" as it is advanced by Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Edmund Carpenter, and others, including me in "The Politics of Reading." But in my opinion they badly damage their own argument by confusing writing with printing. To compare the tabula of Roman schoolboys and the shopping lists of Greek housewives to the printing press is like saying that movies are merely an extension of the theater.

I assume that John Donovan in his playlet is trying to show us what sort of mentality is produced when people get all their ideas from electronic media. Although I am sure he does not realize it, to the extent that there is any truth in Mr. Donovan's parody, he has presented an excellent argument in favor of my point of view. What

he has done, of course, is to give us a glimpse of two electronic illiterates, people whose responses to media lack discrimination, taste, depth, or anything else. The question one must put to Mr. Donovan is, Will you be satisfied merely to deplore this situation, or, as a teacher, do you want to do something important *about* it?

At this point, I want merely to record my astonishment at Lee Deighton's attempt to discredit my article by observing that, with the exception of those in remedial reading, there are no teachers of reading. I had never come across this particular argument before and, with any luck, perhaps I can avoid it in the future. I want also to thank Bob Hogan for introducing a modicum of charm into this debate and to alert him to the strong likelihood that when his daughters are listening to records, something more than "filling up acoustic space" is going on. However, since he is, and has been for some time, an advocate of multimedia literacy, I am in hopes that he will discover, for himself, exactly what *is* happening. Moreover, once he discovers this, I trust that he will make of his insight an obliviscendum.

Finally, as Sherlock Holmes might say, there is the curious case of Robert Beck. I have been told his article is an illustration of his humor. I don't understand the humor myself—perhaps some readers will.

As best as I understand what I wrote, these are the main points I tried to make in the article: that print is no longer the dominant medium of communication in our culture, that the schools are acting as if it were, and that this fact has, and will continue to have, broad political implications. I tried to specify the nature of those implications by advancing the view that new media are disruptive of traditional patterns of thought and social organization and that unless the school assumes a central role in helping youth understand the new media, we are all headed for even more trouble than we are already in. I am arguing that in the face of unprecedented media innovation, it is reactionary to hold to the view that

nothing can take the place of print. It is also dumb. A lot of media will be taking the place of print—indeed, already have. This does not mean that print will disappear. But its power will be (has been) reduced, and it can never have the same meaning it once had in our concept of an educated person.

It is quite possible, as some have suggested, that the spoken word will assume an importance in public affairs quite beyond anything we are accustomed to. I don't want to start a new argument, but at the present time schools do not pay much attention to the development of oral power. Reading scores are abundantly available. Where are the scores that tell us how well or badly our children speak? Where are our "remedial speaking teachers"? (Now, if anyone says that speaking isn't as important as reading or that speaking doesn't need to be taught because it is done so well, then I'll give up.) In any case, I am arguing that those of us in education should not identify ourselves with the idea that only through print can we educate the imagination or cultivate refined and precise thought. To do so is to shirk responsibility and to misinterpret history, both of which always result in very bad politics.

the End...

or the Beginning...